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Faith Ringgold

The Bitter Nest, Part 1: Love in the School Yard, 1998

acrylic on canvas and fabric

Collection Phoenix Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds provided by Contemporary Forum, Stanley and Mikki Weithorn, Consortium of Black Organizations and Others for the Arts; Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Lorenz Anderman, Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Neuberger by exchange

MEET THE ARTIST

Faith Ringgold is a Harlem-born African-American narrative artist who combines quilt-making, painting, and writing to create stories through her art. The artist draws inspiration from her family relationships, particularly those with her mother and daughters. Because her work often relates to her personal experiences, other themes she discusses include cultural heritage and the politics of gender and race.

While Ringgold's "story quilts," with their quilt-like pattern, central painted scene, and narrative story around the perimeter, appeal on the surface to all ages, the underlying subjects do not always match their playful appearance. The artist uses this medium to express the difficulties she and her family has faced over the years. She presents specific experiences or life events in her quilt scenes, sometimes altering the details to express what she wishes would have happened or hopes for in the future. Just as weaving is connected to storytelling and prophecy in classical tradition, Ringgold's quilts share her past while at the same time envisioning the future to come.

To learn more about the artist and her works, visit her website at <http://www.faithringgold.com>.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

The Bitter Nest, Part 1: Love in the School Yard is the first of five story quilts in Ringgold's *The Bitter Nest* series. The artist first developed her story quilt medium during the 1980s. To create these works, she combines a variety of techniques and materials, which may include appliqué, silk screens, photo etching, tie-dye, paints, canvas, and fabric. This series in particular is composed of dyed fabric and painted canvas.

As with most of Ringgold's art, the core subject throughout *The Bitter Nest* series is close to home. Specifically, she reflects on male figures in her daughters' lives and how these relationships have affected them. In the scene of each quilt, she expresses a different kind of relationship or event, some drawing directly from her experiences. With the growing rise of feminist issues from the 1970s forward, feminism plays a significant role in Ringgold's stories. In *The Bitter Nest*, she seeks to put forth her encounters with sexism and oppression. By the last story in the series, the quilt-family's patriarch, or male head of the family, passes away. Through this act of resolution, Ringgold envisions the death of male dominance in her daughters' lives and a more peaceful future for her family.

Applique and other traditional quilting techniques were brought to the United States by slaves from Senegal, Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola, and were an influence on quilting in the American South.

LOOK CLOSELY

Questions to start a conversation:

- How does the mixed-media composition affect your interpretation of the scene's mood?
- What do you imagine the subjects to be feeling or discussing?
- How does the artist's depiction of a school yard compare with your own or those you have seen before? What is similar? Different?
- What clues does the artist provide us about the time and place where this story takes place?
- Why do you think the artist chose these particular people as her subjects?
- What do you expect to occur after this scene?
- Do you have a quilt at home? What does it look like? Who created it and how did it come to belong to your family?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES

Narratives in Song: Oral History and Storytelling

Throughout history, stories and storytelling have helped create personal and community identities. In many traditions, storytelling is synonymous with song, and stories may be chanted or sung, often with musical accompaniment. Setting a story to music is another way Faith Ringgold shares her experiences. Direct students to *Anyone Can Fly* on the “song” tab of the artist’s website (<http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/songpg1.htm>).

Discuss:

After reading the lyrics and listening to the song, ask students the following:

1. What themes the artist has addressed in her song?
2. Why might a storyteller use music to convey a story? How might the use of music as a medium change the way a story is understood by its audience?
3. Consider how setting a story to music might influence how the story is remembered or passed down from generation to generation.
4. What other stories have you heard set to music? The Library of Congress, American Folk Life Center’s Illustrated Guide has many example of folk songs and other narratives set to music (<https://www.loc.gov/folklife/guide/storytelling.html>).

Create

1. Have students each write a short story based upon an experience they’ve had. For younger students, consider instead having students collaboratively tell the story of a shared event that took place in their class, while you transcribe the story for them.
2. Using a melody students are familiar with (*Row, Row Row Your Boat*; *Happy Birthday*; *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, or similar), have students turn their short story into a song.
3. Discuss: What elements can be added or removed from the written story to help transform it into a song that fits the melody?

Share

Have students practice their song, and share it with a partner (pair/share) or class.

MATH

Geometry through Quilts

Lesson adapted from [Talking Geometry through Quilts: K-12 Teaching and Learning from the UNC School of Education](#)

Materials

for lesson:

- Chart paper
- Markers
- Example of Cactus Flower [quilt square](#)
- Construction or scrapbook paper in a variety of colors or patterns

Per student:

- Ten 3X3 inch squares
 - cut six of these squares in half diagonally (forming twelve right triangles)
- One 9X9 inch square
- Glue or glue sticks

Instructions

1. Show students the quilt square example. Identify this square as the cactus flower pattern.
2. Ask students to think of “math words” or mathematical vocabulary that comes to mind when they see this square.
3. As students give vocabulary words aloud, the teacher records them on the chart paper.
4. After list is generated, ask students are to define words as they relate to the quilt square shown.
5. Discuss the 3×3 array that this square forms. Ask students how many individual squares can be found in this square (14 squares).
6. Focus on the two colors used to make the square. Direct a student to show you a square that is one half of one color and one half of another. (“How would we write that fraction?” “Is this entire quilt square exactly one half of one color and one half of another?” “Is that possible? How?”)
7. Inform students that they will be making a duplicate of the quilt square.
8. Pass out 9×9 inch squares to be used for base of quilt square.
9. Direct students to arrange their quilt pieces on their 9×9 square completely and have it checked by you, before they begin to glue the pieces into place. They should start at one corner of the square and be sure that adjacent sides fit tightly together as they glue.
10. The quilt squares should be displayed together to form a class quilt.

WRITING

Responding to Faith Ringgold’s Writing

Tar Beach

In addition to being a renowned artist, Faith Ringgold is also an author. Many of her books are based upon the stories from her narrative quilts. Have students read her book Tar Beach, and then look closely at a reproduction of the quilts of the same story. Have students write a letter to the story’s narrator, Cassie Louise Lightfoot, in response to the conclusion she comes to in the story, “All you need is somewhere to go you can’t get to any other way. The next thing you know, you’re flying above the stars.”

How The People Became Color Blind

Have students read Faith Ringgold’s story, How the People Became Color Blind available on the artist’s website, under the “story” tab (<http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/story.htm>). Have students discuss the author’s choice to end the story. Do they agree or disagree with the conclusion? Have students write a persuasive essay either defending the Angel of Color’s decision to make the people grey, or arguing for a different solution.

For Older Students:

Faith Ringgold’s writing often places serious social concerns into language understood by even young children.

1. Direct students, either working alone or in small groups, to select a current issue they will address through a short story they write and illustrate.
2. Students should research existing books for inspiration writing about difficult topics in a manner appropriate for young readers (recommendations available from Teaching for Change, <http://www.tfcbooks.org/guide-anti-bias-childrens-books>).
3. Have students write and illustrate a short story, targeted to young children, addressing the social issue they’ve selected.
4. Have students share their story with the class, or with younger students.

ART STARTS

QUILT NARRATIVES

Materials

- 9" x 12" white drawing paper
- A variety of cut shapes from scrapbook or other printed paper
- Pencil
- Ruler
- Crayons, colored pencils, paint, or similar materials

Instructions

1. Encourage students to imitate the style of Faith Ringgold's story quilts to recreate or imagine a scene from their own lives.
2. Have students measure 2 inches in from each edge of the paper, and lightly draw a rectangle on their paper, using pencil and a ruler.
3. Students write their story around the edge of this rectangle, leaving space in the center and along the edges. The narrative should form a type of picture frame.
4. Next, ask students to create a unique pattern using the cut shapes to create a border around the outside of their narrative.
5. Finally, students will draw a scene in the center based on their narrative.

LEARN MORE

Faith Ringgold's artist website: <http://www.faithringgold.com>

Agatucci, Cora. *African Storytelling, an Introduction, with Works Cited & Sources for Further Study*.

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/afstory.html>

Holton, Curlee Raven. *Faith Ringgold: A View from the Studio*. Boston: Bunker Hill Publishing in association with Allentown Art Museum, 2004.

Ringgold, Faith. Lyrics and sheet music to *Anyone Can Fly*. <http://www.faithringgold.com/ringgold/songpg1.htm>.

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Ringgold, Faith. *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995.

About Quilting

Talking Geometry through Quilts. K-12 Teaching and Learning from the UNC School of Education

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/2982>

Tying Quilts to Montessori Math and Geometry. AMS Conference, March 2011, Chicago – Jane Lemon and Sue

Clark. http://www.wou.edu/~burtonl/courses/math394/projects/Quilts_Montessori_Math.pdf